
CHAPTER I

THE SELECTION OF SITES FOR FEDERAL BUILDINGS

WASHINGTON has an advantage over the modern cities of the world, with possibly the one exception of St. Petersburg, in having been designed and laid out as the capital city of a great nation.¹ Congress, after much discussion, located the Federal City on the Potomac River by act of Congress, which was approved by President Washington July 16, 1790. The first map of Washington was authorized by an act of Congress July, 1790.² As the first step in the preparation of the map Peter Charles L'Enfant wrote to Jefferson April 4, 1791, requesting maps and data concerning London, Madrid, Paris, Amsterdam, Naples, Venice, and Florence.³ He states that he wishes to obtain this data not that he might copy any one of the maps, but that he might have suggestions for a variety of ideas. Streets, parks, and the sites for the President's House and the Capitol are all shown on the map made by L'Enfant in 1791 practically as they exist to-day. L'Enfant's draft was altered, and the map was completed under the direction of General Washington, who, with a clear

¹ For an earlier version of this chapter, see Glenn Brown, "The Selection of Sites for Federal Buildings," *Architectural Review* 3 (August 1894): 27–29.

² Act of July 16, 1790, *United States Statutes at Large*, c. 28, 2 Stat. 130.

³ See Saul K. Padover, ed., *Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital, 1783–1818* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1946), 56–57. Jefferson had only two of the plans requested by L'Enfant. On L'Enfant's sources for his design, see J. L. Sibley Jennings, Jr., "Artistry as Design: L'Enfant's Extraordinary City," *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 36 (Summer 1979): 225–278. See also John Reys, *Washington on View: The Nation's Capital Since 1790* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) and Pamela Scott, "'This Vast Empire': The Iconography of the Mall, 1791–1848," in Richard Longstreth, ed., *The Mall in Washington, 1791–1991* (Hanover and London: National Gallery of Art, 1991), 37–60.

understanding of the situation, gave close and painstaking personal attention to everything that related to the District of Columbia or the Federal City.⁴ This accurate knowledge of details and interest of the President is clearly shown by letters to the Commissioners and others in authority at that time.⁵ The streets were arranged so as to give quick communication between the buildings and other points of interest, as well as a reciprocity of sight between the buildings and other objects of art which were to be located in the capital city.⁶

Most important for the future beauty and artistic effect of the city was the selection and location of building, statuary, and monument sites. Washington, L'Enfant, and Ellicott, who was doing the field work,

⁴ Brown held that the design concepts of L'Enfant's 1791 map had been essentially retained in the engraved 1792 map by Andrew Ellicott, as modified under the direction of George Washington. See Jennings, "Artistry as Design," 226, for a discussion of the case that the differences between the plans have been underestimated by architects, historians, and planners.

⁵ Washington appointed city commissioners by authority of the 1790 Residence Act to direct improvements for the new capital. The first commissioners were Dr. David Stuart of Alexandria, Thomas Johnson of Frederick, and Representative Daniel Carroll of Rock Creek. On the political background of the founding of the nation's capital, see Kenneth R. Bowling, *Creating the Federal City, 1774–1800: Potomac Fever* (Washington: American Institute of Architects Press, 1988); see also Bowling's *The Creation of Washington, D. C.: The Idea and Location of the American Capital* (Fairfax, Va.: George Mason University Press, 1991). For biographical information on the early commissioners, see William C. di Giacomantino, "All the President's Men: George Washington's Federal City Commissioners," *Washington History* 3 (Summer 1991): 53–75.

⁶ For Brown's study of the vistas of the L'Enfant plan, see "A Suggestion for Grouping Government Buildings, Landscapes, Monuments and Statuary," *Architectural Review* 8 (August 1900): 89–94.

went over the ground together, and “carefully,” as a note on the margin of the map informs us, “selected the sites of the ‘grand edifices’ where they would command the greatest prospect, and be susceptible of the greatest improvement.” It will be seen from L’Enfant’s map [Plate 1] that the Capitol is placed on the center line of four avenues, North, South, and East Capitol streets, and what was to have been the boulevard, thus giving sixteen pleasing and continuous vistas as one approaches the building from different directions.⁷ There are few more pleasing effects than those produced by the Capitol ending the vista of the principal avenues. Similar views were intended of the President’s House. The selection of the site for the Capitol was peculiarly happy in the beauty of the effects produced by distant views of the building. It is difficult to realize the pleasure produced by the sight of the building as seen from the hills of the District, Maryland, and Virginia. The Dome is constantly peeping out through the trees down the valleys in the most unexpected places as one drives or wanders through the country. These glimpses are always enjoyable because the Dome in itself is beautiful in all phases of the atmosphere and the surrounding landscape.

Although the most prominent feature in the landscape, the hill on which the Capitol is built is not of sufficient height to lift the building entirely above its surroundings. This gives the background of hills which, in connection with the sky and the changing colors which the foliage undergoes with the seasons, adds to the charm of this white pile. It is rarely that you lose sight of this beautiful object during more than a few minutes in riding or walking in the city of Washington or the surrounding country. The views of the city and the surrounding country from the Capitol are the most pleasing to be found in Washington. The

⁷ Brown’s Plate 1 was a detail photograph of the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey’s 1887 facsimile of the L’Enfant plan. For a discussion of the history of the map’s curatorial care, see Richard W. Stephenson, “Delineation of a Grand Plan,” *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 36 (Summer 1979): 218–221.

wisdom displayed in the selection of a site for the “Congress House,” as the Capitol is designated on L’Enfant’s first map [Plate 1], drawn in 1791, has been abundantly proven when we consider the never-failing pleasure produced by the finished result. The President’s House was located so as to form the vista at the end of seven streets, the southern front facing the Washington Monument. The view also of the President’s House from the river and hills of Virginia is very effective. The “grand edifices” were to be located in the center of parks, in which landscape artists could use their skill to enhance or emphasize the beauty of the building, and make it the crowning feature of the whole. Under such conditions the buildings could be seen, and if beautiful enjoyed. The Mall, extending from the Capitol to the Washington Monument, was to have been traversed by a grand avenue 400 feet wide. On both sides of this avenue parks were to have been laid out, ending against a background of public buildings. These sites allowed room for the growth of the Government business. The engraved map published in 1792 [Plate 2] shows sites for buildings as well as monuments, columns, and statuary, located so as to be viewed down the different avenues, the end in view being, L’Enfant says, “to preserve through the whole a reciprocity of sight” between the important points of the city.⁸

How has this really wise and artistic scheme been carried out? The Capitol and President’s House are on the ground originally selected for them. The wisdom of the choice has been proved by the pleasure derived from the completed structures. The effectiveness of the White House has been marred by the erection of the Treasury and of the State, War, and Navy Department buildings. In this way a sight of it is cut off from Pennsylvania avenue on the east, and New York avenue on the west. The Congressional Library is the first structure to bring an antagonistic element

⁸ Quotation taken from “Observations Explanatory of the Plan,” listed both on the 1791 L’Enfant manuscript plan and the 1792 Ellicott engraved plan. “Congress House” was changed by Thomas Jefferson to “Capitol” in his review of L’Enfant’s plans.

in conjunction with the Capitol.⁹ The Library has been built across Pennsylvania avenue on the east. Down this street for miles a fine view of the Capitol could formerly be obtained. Now the Dome of the Capitol rising over the Library, and seen in connection with the dome or central feature of the Library, produces a decided discord. In later years the selection of sites for public buildings seems to have been purely a haphazard one. No general system is being followed; no man or men seem to have studied the question as a whole. The development of the original and wise plan seems to have been forgotten.

It is to be regretted that we have no bureau of fine arts composed of cultivated architects and landscape artists. Such a board could study jointly the question of grouping as a whole and in detail. They could select intelligently designs for buildings as well as sculpture. If we are aiming at the beautiful, the building and its surroundings must be in harmony.

The most notable suggestion for building sites on the map of L'Enfant is the line which forms the north and south boundary of the parks between the Capitol and the Monument. Naturally, the first thought would be to keep the parks free from buildings, as they are the people's breathing spaces.

⁹ Brown is referring to what today is called the Thomas Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress.

The more the scheme laid out by Washington and L'Enfant is studied, the more forcibly it strikes one as the best. It is easy to imagine the magnificence of a boulevard 400 feet wide, beginning at the Capitol and ending with the Monument, a distance of nearly a mile and a half, bounded on both sides by parks 600 feet wide, laid out by a skilled landscape architect and adorned by the work of capable artists. Looking from the boulevard across the park a continuous line of beautiful buildings was to have formed the background. They were not to have been deep enough to curtail either the natural or artistic beauties of the park, or to encroach upon the people's right to an air space. By this time such an avenue would have acquired a world-wide reputation, if it had been carried out by competent architects, landscape artists, and sculptors consulting and working in harmony with each other. The parked portion of the Champs Elysées, which is approximately 1,300 feet wide and three-quarters of a mile long, would not have compared with it in magnitude or grandeur.

The original plan can be commended for other reasons than those of beauty. It has every advantage in point of economy in maintenance, repairs, supervision, inter-communication, transportation, and accessibility of the Departments to each other and to the public. To carry out the original plan, or one closely allied thereto, in the erection of future Government buildings, is feasible, but the probability of such wise action without a competent bureau of fine arts is infinitesimal.

MAP OF WASHINGTON CITY BY PETER CHARLES L'ENFANT, PLATE I

NOTES COPIED FROM THE MARGIN OF L'ENFANT'S MAP.

Plan of the City, intended for the Permanent Seat of the Government of the United States. Projected agreeable to the PRESIDENT of the UNITED STATES, in pursuance of an ACT of CONGRESS passed the sixteenth day of July MDCCXC, "establishing the Permanent Seat on the bank of the Potomac." By Peter Charles L'Enfant.

OBSERVATIONS EXPLANATORY OF THE PLAN.

- I. The positions of the different grand edifices and for the several grand squares or areas of different shape as they are laid down were first determined on the most advantageous ground commanding the most extensive prospects, and the better susceptible of such improvements as the various intents of the several objects may require.
- II. Lines or avenues of direct communication have been devised to connect the separate and most distant objects with the principal, and to preserve through the whole a reciprocity of sight at the same time. Attention has been paid to the passing of those leading avenues over the most favorable ground for prospect and convenience.
- III. North and south lines, intersected by others running due east and west, make the distribution of the city into streets, squares, etc., and those lines have been so combined as to meet at certain given points with those divergent avenues, so as to form on the spaces "first determined" the different squares or areas, which are all proportioned in magnitude to the number of avenues leading to them.

REFERENCES.

- A. The equestrian figure of George Washington, a monument voted in 1783 by the late Continental Congress.
- B. An historic column. Also intended for a mile or itinerary column, from whose station (a mile from the Federal house) all distances or places through the continent are to be calculated.
- C. A naval itinerary column, proposed to be erected to celebrate the first rise of Navy and to stand a ready monument to consecrate its progress and achievements.
- D. This church is intended for national purposes, such as public prayer, thanksgivings, funeral orations, etc., likewise a proper shelter for such monuments as were voted by the late Continental Congress for those heroes who fell in the cause of liberty and for such others as may hereafter be decreed by the voice of a grateful nation.
- E. For grand fountains, intended with a constant spout of water. N. B. There are within the limits of the city above twenty-five good springs of excellent water, abundantly supplied in the driest season of the year.
- F. Grand cascade, formed of the water from the sources of the Tiber.
- G. Public walk, being a square of 1,200 feet, through which carriages may ascend to the upper square of the Federal house.
- H. Grand avenue, 400 feet in breadth and about a mile in length, bordered with gardens, ending in a slope from the houses on each side. The avenue leads to the monument A and connects the Congress Garden with the
- I. President's park and the
- K. Well-improved field, being a part of the walk from the President's house, of about 1,800 feet in breadth and three-fourths of a mile in length. Every lot deep-colored red, with green plots, designates some of the situations which command the most agreeable prospects and which are the best calculated for spacious houses and gardens, such as may accommodate foreign ministers, etc.
- L. Around the square and all along the
- M. Avenue from the two bridges to the Federal house the pavement on each side will pass under an arched way, under whose cover shops will be most conveniently and agreeably situated. This street is 160 feet in breadth and a mile long.



FIRST ENGRAVED MAP, 1792.

This engraving of the L'Enfant plan was considered the first "official" map of the city.

(The first large engraving of the L'Enfant plan was actually the Samuel Hill version of the plan published in Boston in 1792.)

This map was prepared by Andrew Ellicott and engraved by Thackara and Vallance, Philadelphia, 1792. Geography and Map Division, LC.